



Cattle without herdsmen: Animal and human beings in the prehistoric rock art of the Western Sahara



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ABSTRACT

Because of the scarcity and discontinuity of the archaeological excavations in the Western Sahara, rock-art appears to be one of the most relevant sources of information in order to discuss the subsistence, technology and ideology of the neolithic communities. However, in contrast to what we would expect from the evident pastoral scenes depicted on the Central Saharan rock art, the Western Saharan art of Neolithic age is dominated by wild or isolated animals. The pastoral scenes always are more uncertain to describe than the hunting scenes, which are also marginal but easier to interpret. In the current state of the research, the nature of the Western Saharan Neolithic, the putative age of the images, and the type of information expected from rock art should be questioned.

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1. Introduction

The rock art studies in the Western Sahara were initiated with the Spanish colonization (Asensio, 1930) and experienced two waves of intense discoveries in the 1940s and 1970s. The research on field was interrupted in 1975 with the Spanish withdrawal after the Moroccan occupation and the consequent Sahrawi liberation war. In 1995, after the cease-fire of 1991, the University of Girona, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of the Western Sahara, started research, which has been mostly focused in the study and preservation of the rock art (Soler et al., 1999). At this moment, other teams are developing also promising research on the archaeology of the Western Sahara (Brooks et al., 2003; Muñiz, 2005; Sáenz de Buruaga 2013–2014 in the zone under the control of the Polisario Front, and Al-Khatib et al., 2008, in the Moroccan occupied territory) or analyzing documents obtained before the war (Balbín and de Bueno, 2009).

Since then, hundreds of painted rock shelters and engraved slabs have been recorded (Soler, 2007). The rock paintings have been most intensively studied and, therefore, we are in condition to trace the regional rock art evolution. The analysis of many of the engraved slabs of Sluguilla Lawash, which is a major rupestrian site of the Western Sahara, is still in process. The stylistic methods we have employed have been proved useful to define a sequence of

new pictorial regional styles, which inform about the technological, economical, ideological and ecological evolution of the prehistoric Western Sahara, particularly during the Neolithic.

However, the paintings of the Zemmur, which are a very relevant ensemble in the regional context and are characterized by abundant depictions of human and animal beings, may not represent enough pastoral scenes to properly describe the economic nature of the Western Saharan Neolithic (and non-agricultural). In the absence of well-dated and rich archaeological sequences, the missing iconographic evidence about the relation between Neolithic and pastoralism represents a serious obstacle towards the description of the economic basis of the Western Saharan Neolithic. In the past, rock art research contributed to the controversy on the nature of the Saharan Neolithic, particularly because of the early dichotomy established rock art researchers as Frobenius, Reygasse, Huard, Leclant, Allard-Huard, Mori and others between images belonging either to hunter or to pastoral communities (Le Quellec, 2008).

That pioneer research alluded to a supposed absence of domestic animals in some groups of images to distinguish a supposed art of hunters from a supposed art of herders. Furthermore, the scholars already associated the existence of such a pastoral tradition with the aesthetically decadent and low naturalistic depictions, in contraposition to a hunters' art tradition full of details and naturalism.

Later, the discussion overflowed the aesthetic domain and the iconographic arguments were expanded to the rest of the material culture. A Saharan cultural group of hunters was defined after the

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grouping of several cultural elements (Huard and Allard, 1977). The remaining ones were associated to an older pastoral civilization.

Although the mentioned authors limited their argumentation to the Nile zone, the Central Sahara and the Saharan Atlas, their influence echoed in the Western Sahara. At that time, Spanish academics were working almost exclusively on the engravings, which were analyzed following Monod and Mauny's classificatory system (Monod, 1932; Mauny, 1954). Although Monod's system was designed to avoid any stylistic constraint, the works of the Spanish scholars added the aforementioned simplified stylistic considerations and explicitly introduced a vague relation between style, ethnicity, and age.

The most evident case is found in the work of Julio Martínez Santa-Olalla, which related the group of the “naturalistic and sensorial” images to “hunter–gatherers” communities. They were identified as the depictions of wild animals and the supposed absence of cattle. On the other hand, the group of the “schematic and intellectual engravings” was bound to a “hunter-pastoral” population because, he said, the depictions of domestic animals were found only among this group (Martínez Santa-Olalla, 1941). The hunter–gatherer groups were considered to have existed earlier in time but into the Holocene. Curiously, Martínez's labelling of that first group as “hunter-pastoral” already denotes the difficulty to isolate the hunter component on most of the Western Saharan rock art, which prefigures some results of our research.

2. Materials and methods

To address the question about the nature of the Western Saharan Neolithic, from the perspective of the rock-art research, in

the following lines we will introduce and discuss the iconographic evidence of Neolithic age concerning human and animal interactions. We hope to complete the vision of our predecessors with the results of the study of more than 120 painted rock shelters (more than 2700 figures) from Rekeiz Lemgasem, Wadi Kenta, Wadi Ymal, Rekeiz Ajahfun and Asako sites (Soler, 2007), in the Zemmur area (Fig. 1). That data was not available during the early studies of the colonial period. We also include in the discussion some relevant engraved slabs of Sluguilla Lawash, most of Tazina style (Milburn, 1972; Soleilhavou, 1997; Soler et al., 2001), and an example of the pecked engravings from Blugzeimat site (Soler et al., 1999).

Curiously, the publications from the colonial period devoted a marginal place to the rock paintings, especially those from the Zemmur (although they are among the most abundant and geographically continuous depictions of the country). The reason of their virtual absence in the literature until very late (Nowak, 1975) lies in the fact that the eastern zones of the territory lay very far away from the main Spanish settlements. Therefore, they were not so intensively viewed. Despite what happened in the neighboring French colonies, in the Spanish Sahara there were no local archaeological institutions developing sustained research and homogeneous surveys. The main sites used to be studied repeatedly by different metropolitan scholars. Those circumstances led to the idea that the paintings were scarce.

The location of most of the Western Saharan rock paintings in the eastern part of the country is a consequence of the geological context, which only allows the abundant formation of rock shelters in the eroded cliffs of the Ordovician-age sandstone tabular reliefs from the Zemmur (Fig. 2). In comparison to the flatlands of the western coast, the high plains of the northern *hammad*a, or the

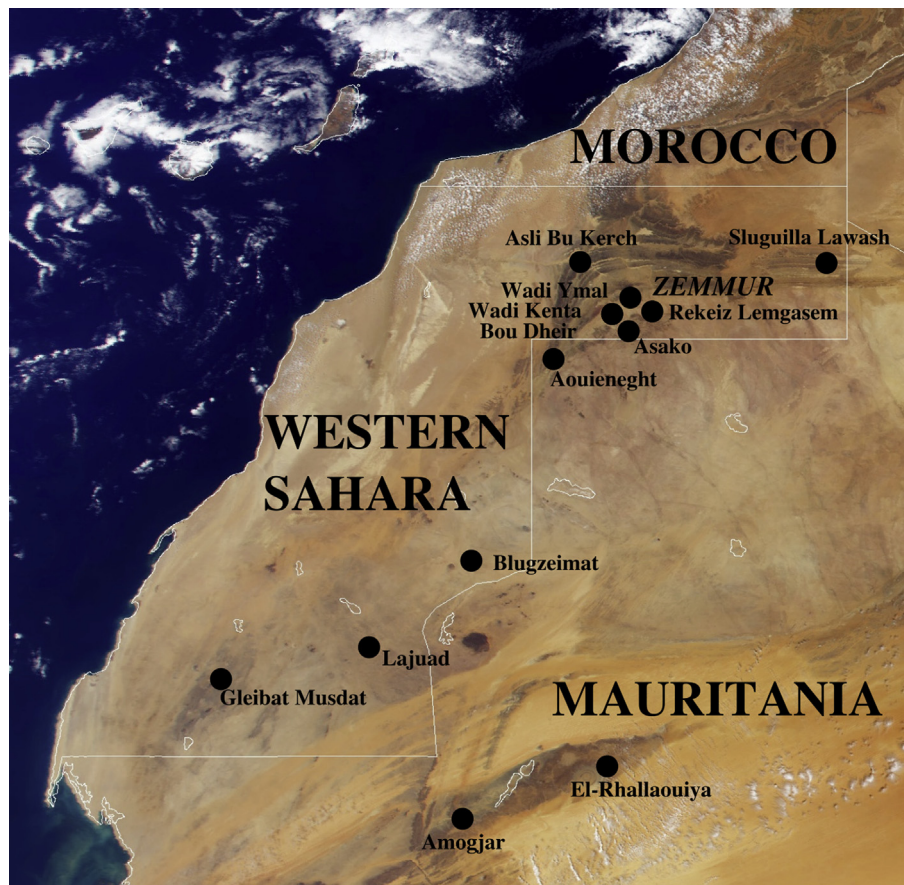


Fig. 1. Map with the situation of the rock-art sites mentioned in this article.

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